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ABSTRACT

This study examined the personal-environment relationship from a social-cognitive perspective for black college students (N=90) at two southern, nearly all-white institutions. The study employed observational learning models in relations to academic and social integrated behaviors of black college students. The study postulated that the persistence or withdrawal of black students was influenced by cognitive processes. The data showed that the first level of black students' processes occurred more in academic settings than in social systems of the college. Students applied negative feedback in classes to other campus situations. Students also formed opinions of white students from academic experiences which made it difficult for the black students to believe that blacks were not intruders in the environment. These negative experiences affected the perception of the college. The presence of black faculty models provided positive feedback mechanisms for the black students. Finally, the students concluded that the college environment was unsupportive to black students and was not a place of racial harmony. Surprisingly, many would not have attended another college if they had the resources. Included are 25 references. (JB)

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THE STUDENT-INSTITUTIONAL FIT FOR THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT: DO COLLEGE RETENTION PROGRAMS FACILITATE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ACCESS?

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INTRODUCTION

The Educational Gaps Between the 70s and 80s

The historical educational boundaries for blacks have always been difficult to breakthrough and overcome. However, with the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, Jensen's (1969) theoretical concept of Blacks' inability to learn was set aside to accept Clark & Clark's (1947) psychological findings that restricted environments, not intelligence affect one's educational outcome in our society.

Therefore, during the 60s and 70s, the dark veils of educational boundaries were removed, and the self-worth and dignity of the black child was visible. The federal government assumed a leading role with preparing minority youth to become productive members of the American society. Not only were a number of educational programs created and funded, but the socioeconomical calcium was also added to strengthen physical, psychological, and intellectual aims toward high educational gains. If the black child were naked, he/she was clothed to attend school. If he/she were hungry, he/she was fed nutritionally to sustain for learning. If he/she were homeless, he/she was provided shelter for preparational home learning. Subsequently, the educational programs were available at school to narrow educational gaps that had existed between black and white students in previous decades.

It is well documented throughout the literature that the existence of the federal role in minority education served as spiral steps to educational advancement at the postsecondary level. For example, by 1978, blacks represented 10.4% of all full-time undergraduate students, compared to the 6.8% in 1970. Further statistical evidence shows by 1979, 7.9% of the population with four or more college years was black, compared to the 4.5% reported in 1970 (U.S.Bureau of Census, 1982). Marginal

differences between blacks and whites with the same average number of schooling years were also reflected. A major implication from these comparative findings across decades is postsecondary educational persistence rates were higher with programs that fostered access. Moreover, other statistical data showed a large percentage of minorities were able to escape low socioeconomical backgrounds with increased educational opportunities (English & Settle, 1976).

Now after the black baby boomers have shown successful educational gains largely in a desegregated society, the next generation of black youth is falling through the cracks in an integrated society. The college participation rate for blacks appears to be diminishing as tuition costs rise and federal aid reductions increase.

Since the federal government's withdrawal from educational programs in the 80s, adverse effects have been observed with minority education. Statistical reports have found that an increasing percentage number of black high school graduates do not plan to attend college. While 32% of the black high school graduates (18-24 years old) entered college in 1975, the percentage rate dropped to approximatedly 27% during the 80s. Moreover, figures showed the percentage of blacks enrolled in institutions of higher education continued to decrease 10% between 1982-86 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1986). In 1986, only 48% of the minority students enrolled in higher education were black, compared to the 52% enrollment in 1984 (American Council on Education, 1989). Blacks also received fewer bachelor's and master's degrees in 1984 than in 1978 (American Council on Education, 1986). A downward educational trend among blacks was comparatively seen with postsecondary gains between blacks and whites. While four or more years of college for whites were increasing by 25% in 1986, postsecondary attainments for blacks were decreasing by 13% in 1986 (Educational Statistics, 1987). By the end of the 80s, postsecondary education attainment rates for blacks looked bleak (American Council on Education,

1989).

With these persistent downward educational trends among black youth, several questions linger at the beginning of a new decade. What has happened to all the educational dreams of black children? What has destroyed their perceptual hopes, beliefs, and aspirations about educational fulfillment and success? Are the black youth of the 80s and 90s so different from the black baby boomers who equated high educational attainments with socioeconomical attaainments? More significantly, of the black high school students who attend college, why don't they persist longer than they do?

College Attrition Patterns of Blacks on Predominantly White Campuses: A Persistent Sociological and Psychological Debate

For a decade, the growing college attrition patterns among the black student population have been acutely examined by educators and researchers. Microscopic lens have shown not only low retention and graduation rates with black college students, but the low persistence rates are largely observed with blacks attending predominantly white colleges and universities as well (McCauley, 1988; Nettles, Gosman, Thoney, & Dandridge, 1985). In fact, the attrition rate seems to be occuring more rapidly by the end of the second year of college. Comparatively, the attrition rate of blacks on predominantly white campuses was 34%, compared to the 31% rate of whites. By the end of the fifth year, the attrition mean percentages increased as much as 9%, compared to the 7% attrition increase for whites (Nettles et. al, 1985). Parenthetically, graduation rates for blacks at predominantly white institutions tend to be lower than that of whites. While 43% of white students tend to graduate in four years, only 35% of the blacks tend to graduate within this same period. Five-year graduation rates tend to also be lower for blacks (48%) than for white students (56%) (Nettles et. al., 1985). Similar findings with blacks have consistently been reported at

other predominantly white institutions (Clark & Crawford, 1991).

In response to what appears to be persistent college dropout patterns among blacks on white campuses, a number of postsecondary attrition studies have examined the phenomena from a sociological and psychological perspective. According to some social scientist, the college withdrawal behaviors of blacks are attributed to academic and social isolation and distance (Gibbs, 1973; Willie & McCord, 1973). Purportedly, black students on white campuses do not have access to academic learning, because they are frequently tracked into remedial programs. This limited access is further evident when black students receive lower grades than white students (Loo & Rolison, 1986). Thus, academic and social distance from the mainstream of white college environments influences the withdrawal tendencies of blacks.

Conversely, psychological studies argue that blacks on white campuses lack psychological support systems that will foster college persistence. College persistence for blacks is largely viewed as a function of self-concept and self-reliance. These two psychological factors are viewed more significant to blacks than whites (Portes & Wilson, 1976; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985). The critical assumption is noncognitive behaviors of self influence black students' college persistence, while cognitive behaviors influence white studednts' persistence. The underlying assumption is black students function in sponsored-mobility enviornments that enable them to have psychological support for high self-esteem. Comparatively, white students function in competitive-oriented environments (Porter, 1974). However, this limited perspective tends to imply that access to competitive academic learning would limit black students' ability to function unless psychological needs are met.

Retention Programs and the Student-Institution Fit Model for Black

College Students

A growing body of college attrition studies has been the impetus for designing many college retention programs with academic and social services. Purportedly, these programs are designed to increase black students' persistence rates, especially on predominantly white campuses. In examining the academic and social components of these programs, it is evident that two lines of research studies (college effect and college persistence/withdrawal) have dominated the structure and function of retention paradigms. It is also evident from college retention paradigms that the student-institution fit model from these studies has been widely accepted.

Both college effect and persistence/withdrawal studies posit a student-institution fit model that causally explains the postsecondary attainment process. In conceptualizing this process, the two models only present marginal dimensional differences of the process. With the college effect model, the attainment outcome is coneptualized as a function of four influential factors. Presumably, when personal (pre-enrollment characteristics) and institutional (structure, organization) factors have a "matching" effect, this effect influences the interactions and the level of success within academic (faculty) and social (peers) settings. All four influential factors have a causal sequence that effectuate postsecondary attainment outcomes (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, Smart, Ethington, & Nettles, 1987).

Insert Figure 1

Similar theoretical constructs are found with the college persistence/withdrawal model. However, the explanatory power of the model developed by Tinto (1975) has an extended conceptual basis for examining collegiate experiences in academic and social systems. To a large degree, persistence tends to be strongly related to one's

commitment to self and the selected institution. Subsequently, when this commitment behavior is present, the student will interactively integrate into the academic and social systems of the college environment. Presumably, the greater the success with collegiate experiences in academic and social settings, the greater the likelihood for college persistence.

Insert Figure 2

Major Criticism of the Student-Institution Fit Model for the Black College Student: Implications for College Retention Programs

The baseline data from the two previously cited studies present a path analysis for understanding how students "fit" into the college environment. The data also shed some light on how college factors influence students' postsecondary goals. However, the student-institution fit model is warranted with different multicultural groups (Tinto, 1982). There is some documented evidence from cross-sectional studies that snow differential college attrition patterns across ethnic groups when academic and social experiences are taken into account (Loo & Rolison, 1986; Trujillo, 1986). In fact, postsecondary stuidies by Burrell (1981) and Trujillo (1986) have presented empirical evidence that differential interactions between professors and minority and non-minority students can be observed in academic college settings. Fleming (1988) also observed differential academic and social experiences with blacks on predominantly white and black campuses. Therefore, when one begins to examine the student-institution fit model for its applicabilty for the black college student whose collegiate experiences differ from their white counterparts, the model becomes problematic.

There are three basic criticisms about the model being employed to design college retention programs for black students.

First, the conceptual basis for the theoretical framework seems to strongly suggest a person-environment relationship that has to be created between the two independent entities prior to interactive functions. In other words, unless common characteristics are found between the two, conflict will presumably emerge. The behaviorist views human behavior as responsive and adaptive to situational factors in the environment. Either the person will respond to the stimuli in the environment, or he/she will find adaptive means to accept the environment in its present state. Similarly, the student-institution fit model has this theoretical construct. The greater the match between the student and institution, the greater the possiblity for successful academic and social interactions.

The causal links in the model become more problematic when compatible factors between the black college student and predominantly white institution are examined. A match would hardly occur between the two, primarily because black students enter with a sociocultural background that differs from the dominant socioculture on that campus. Hence, to accentuate matching characteristics as significant predictors of ademic/social integration is to suggest that black students' personal differences are inappropriate, and they require change to "fit" into a college environment that will remain structurally unchanged. It is evident from college retention paradigms that the college environment has regulatory control over sociocultural behaviors, rather than an environment that has reciprocal functions with the black student.

A further examination of college retention programs also reveals they are frequently designed with assumptions that black students need assistance with adopting the norms, values, and beliefs of the environment. A critical underlying

assumption is black students have a "misfit" image that needs adjustments. Therefore, the propensity is for college retention programs to function as service-oriented agents whose primary purpose is to help black students become compatiable with their college environment. Academic, advising, and counseling components function as service centers that facilitate adjustments and directions on the college campus.

It is very easy to observe how much emphasis is often placed on regulating the black students' behaviors to respond to the existing structure and organization of the college environment. Rather than change the structure and organization of the college environment, it is more convenient to expect black students to make sociocultural and psychological changes. For example, in academic settings, black students are expected to relinquish thier sociocultural beliefs and values when conflicting theories are presented. Moreover, the socicultural language is often unacceptable in academic settings. Thus, black students are generally expected to set aside how they feel and psychologically accept the the normative behaviors in classroom settings.

The second basic criticism of the student-institution fit application lies with the academic and social integration concept. Since these two components are viewed as significant determinants of postsecondary attainment, the collegiate experiences in these settings must be acutely examined in relation to their impact on black students' responsive behaviors and attitudes. The primary fallacy, however, with the model's concept of academic/social integration is the assumption that similar integration patterns are expected to occur when varied students have similar characteristics with the environment. The environmental conditions in which the integrated process may be expected not to occur remains unexplained.

The authors argue that academic/social integration implies a functioning process of interaction and socialization. A person has to become attached to academic/social systems. Reciprocal interactive behaviors between the student and

environment have to occur. Yet, the interactions between faculty and black students in academic settings seem to remain unaddressed by retention models. Very seldom do retention programs encompass helping faculty and staff to understand the sociocultural behaviors of black students. To a large degree, the only faculty and staff members who are actually interacting with black students are those who are responsible for providing special remedial or tutorial services. Parenthetically, there is very little attention given to improve interaction patterns between minority groups and faculty, staff, administrators, and non-minority students. Most non-minority instructors and professors only choose to interact with black students when they are controlling the academic and social environment. The presence of faculty and black students in the setting does not suggest that interaction is taking place between the two (Trujillo, 1986). Therefore, because the total commitment from the college environment is difficult to achieve, academic integration continues to be defined in terms of providing academic and remedial help, while social integration continues to be defined in relation to desegregated social activities that send conflicting messages to black students.

Finally, the authors assert that persistence and withdrawal behaviors are not spontaneous responses that occur as a consequence of black students' ability/inability to integrate into academic and social settings. To accept this consequence as an expected mode of behavior is to assume that people merely respond to stimulus events from the environment without very little thought to the events. Again, this premise from the student-instiution fit model presents a unidirectional analysis of the environment as the regulator of behavior. This premise further assumes that the individual gives no thought to what is occuring to them in the environment. Thus, the stimulus is viewed as either positive or negative. College retention programs presume that if the appropriate stimulus is applied, black students will persist at that college.

Therefore, as we see college retention programs "fishing" for the positive stimulus that averts withdrawal behaviors, black students tend not to respond positively to the special academic services and sociocultural activities. In some cases, it has been observed that black faculty/staff committees are frequently organized to facilitate black students with postsecondary attainments. However, such organization primarily function at a low-power level in relation to the institution, rather than at the high-level of understanding as to how to facilitate black students' connective function in the environment.

Social-Cognitive Adaptive Phases of Black College Students: Implications from a Recent Study

It is obviously clear from college attrition reports that a large percentage of black students are not responding to college retention programs at predominantly white instiutions. Therefore, in light of this observed phenomena, the authors have examined the person-enviornment relationhsip for black students with a social-cognitive perspective. This social-cognitive concept was pioneered by Bandura (1977). The theoretical construct posits that person-environment relationships are a consequence of four influential factors operating interactively on each other to effectuate expectancy outcome. Rather than merely examing how people react to stimulus events, the concept views the behavior, cognitive, personal, and environmental factors as having reciprocal influences on outcome behavioral patterns.

Thus, how people respond to their environment is mediated by thoughts which regulate actions. What people think, believe, and feel affects how they will respond to the environment. In other words, how people respond to their environment is based on how they have organized the information from the events, as well as how they have

interpreted the events. As people begin to observe and interpret what behaviors lead to what, they develop causal beliefs that affect their behavioral responses.

In applying Bandura's theory to black students' experiences on white campuses, a research study was conducted to examine some black students' cognitive processes of collegiate experiences. Two black student sampled groups (N = 90) attending a predominantly white southern university in two different states were a part of the study. The black population at both universities was less than four percent of the total student population.

First, the study employed Bandura's (1986) observational learning model in which information about environmental events is processed through four cognitive channels prior to new behavior and conequential behavior. While examining these four processes in relation to academic and social integrated behaviors of black college students, the authors modiefed and extended Bandura's construct to causally explain the inetegration in relation to seven social-cognitive adaptive phases in which black students (1) observe, (2) attend, (3) retain, (4) experience, (5) interpret, (6) evaluate, and (7) conclude about the environmental events. Each cognitive phase has a set of causal behaviors that are mediated by a series of thought patterns.

Secondly, the study postulated that persistence/withdrawal behaviors of black college students are influenced by these thought procceses. In particularly, what is retained from the college environment is either confirmed or altered by feedback mechanisms in the environment. The experiences from this retentional knowledge is subsequently channeled toward a second level of cognitive processes of interpretation and evaluation of events. It is at this stage that black college students begin to conclude whether or not there is a "match" between them and the college environment. The black student will either persist or withdraw based on how these collegiate experiences are finally interpreted and evaluated in relation to

accomplishing their postsecondary goals at that institution. Therefore, the study examined what knowledge was retained about the environment and how this knowledge was interpreted.

Insert Figure 3

Some Findings and Implications

To a large degree, the study employed a social-cognitive analysis. As Halpin and Croft (1963) noted, the actual behavior is less important than perceived behavior, because perception is what controls one's response.

When black students are placed in a living environment that differs from their sociocultural background, they go through social-cognitive adaptive phases to learn what leads to what, and to know what behavioral responses are expected and appropriate in that college setting. The data findings showed the academic setting to be the dominant source for black students' thought processes. What happens in these academic settings with professors and peers influences how the experiences will be interpreted. Based on the black students' evaluation of themselves and the environment, the black students arrive at the decision to persist or withdraw from that college setting.

The data clearly showed that the black students' processes occur more in academic settings than in social systems of the college. There seems to be a first level of observation in which the black students go through with the cognitive processes. Initially, they observe and attend to selected information about what is occurring in their academic environment. In the study, the selected academic information focused

on the professors and students in classroom situations. It is from this attended information, the black students retained specific information about the professors and peers in relation to the feedback received in academic settings. While at this observational level, the black students tended to retain how professors responded to them and how grades were assigned. If the black students retained and experienced negative feedback from professors and peers in classes, they began to apply this knowledge in other campus situations. For example, the expected achievement level for blacks was low. This view was also cognitively processed for black faculty models when they observed their low-level position in the environment.

Similarly, the thoughts about white student peers tended to occur from academic experiences with them. What was observed and retained about white student peers was their academic negative implications about blacks primarily in philosophy, psychology, and sociology classes. The black students also felt that despite similar academic performance behaviors with white peers, there were academic outcome differences. To the black students, it was difficult for them to conclude the achievement merit system was the same for all students, because of dissimilar academic outcome patterns on campus. When the black students observe, retain, and experience how similar behaviors between blacks and whites do not equal the same outcome in the environment, they begin to generalize observations and experiences to new situations in the environment. As far as the black students are concerned, white students are portrayed as "model" students in the environment, while black students frequently feel as intruders.

As the black students began to move into the second cognitive mode of interpretation, they began to try to make sense of what was observed and experienced at the first level. It is evident at this second level that negative feedback influences in academic settings tended to influence the negative perceptions of the college. To

them, what was retained about professors defined access to academic service and the achievement merit system. It was further noted that with the retentional knowledge, the black students developed a sense of their own ethnic identity and role on campus. This is why they wouldn't recommend black high school students attend a predominantly white college. The data also presented implications that it's during the second level that the black students begin evaluating the events in relationship to self. While they attended to recurrent messages about them as a person and their expected role on campus, they also utilized the evaluation processes of self to determine their compatibility with the college. This premise was more pronounced with how the black students defined academic/social integration. Academic integrtion was defined in terms of (1) professors being fair with black and white students, (2) the grading system being the same for all students, and (3) the academic services equally provided for black students. Some students cited that office visits for academic purposes with some professors are not the same for black and white students. Parenthetically, to them, having minority opportunities to participate in all college organizations and activities, feeling a part of college activities, being treated with respect and dignity, and feeling accepted by white peers on campus defined social integration.

It was noted that black faculty models in the environment served as positive feedback mechanisms for the black students. The presence of black faculty members enabled the students to feel secure on predominantly white college campuses. Futhermore, they felt more black faculty members were needed on their campus. The implication is black faculty models can facilitate black students' cognitive processes of the college setting. If black students are processing negative thoughts about the college, black faculty models can alter negative thoughts so the black students can achieve their postsecondary goals. This finding also suggests the importance of developing black faculy and student relationships for black students to feel confident

about expressing their thoughts about collegiate experiences.

Finally, the black students concluded their college environment was an unsupportive environment for blacks. In particularly, it was noted that the black students were aware of blacks being recruited for predominantly white colleges, yet, not graduating from them. Moreover, it was concluded that the college was a place where little or no racial harmony between black and white students prevailed. To them, blacks at predominantly black colleges have a more supportive environment than they do. Surprisingly, however, despite these conclusions, the black students would not have attended another college if they had the financial resources.

Conclusions

The findings from this study support the significance of black students believing they have successfully integrated into academic and social settings. However, there are strong implications from the study that the black students' sense of integration is not aligned with the literature's definition. While the literature defines academic integration as a function of grades and academic performance, the black students cannot experience this integrated level until they have positive experiences with professors and peers in classroom settings. Rather than black students assuming all the responsibility from the academic integration, the college environment has reciprocal responsibilities. Similarly, social integration takes on a different meaning for black students. It's not only the responsibility of the black students to find appropriate behaviors that influence social interactions, but the college must be willing to also assume some responsibilities with structuring and functioning for a pluralistic environment.

Conceptually, the black students operate from a cognitive base in which they take selected bits of information from their transactional experiences in that college

environment. How they make sense of this environment depends on how the cognitive information is organized and interpreted by them. To causally explain how persistence and withdrawal behaviors are mediated by thoughts, these thought processes must be observed and analyzed in relationship to black college students' behaviors. Thus, it is evident from the experiences that the black students have in academic and social settings, the widely-accepted student-instiution fit model is inapplicable.

If we are going to design college retention programs to fit black students, the models cannot be designed with high expectations that we can fit the blacks to the model. College retention paradigms cannot be designed as if the black student is the problem, rather than the solution. The black college student must be perceived as one who has a connected function to the college environment.

The authors have found great utility with a social-cognitive approach to help define the student-institution fit for the black student. The approach has enabled the authors to gather information from the black students for whom programs are designed. This approach can help educators to understand more clearly how black students are "fitting" into the college environment, and what they are experiencing at different college levels. If we can know what and how black students are thinking about college experiences prior to actual withdrawal behaviors, the more we can know how to help them persist for graduation. High college attrition rates among black students can only decrease when we increase our level of commitment to create a postsecondary attainment environment for them.

In our efforts to increase black students college retention, we cannot be like the physician who kept looking for the patient's problem, but he/she couldn't find it. He/she observed with the naked eye and examined with sophisticated diagnostic techniques. Yet, the efforts were futile. Several months passed, and it finally dawned

on him/her to ask the patient two simple questions: **"WHAT HURTS YOU AND WHERE DOES IT HURT?" ALL THAT HAD TO BE DONE WAS TO ASK THE PERSON!**

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